

## **Apr 23/23 – Leader’s Guide - “Overcome Evil with Good” Matthew 5:38-42**

1. What is our most natural reaction to those who have wronged us? What impact does that reaction have on the other person? on us?

*This is simply a question to bring people to consider the situations in their own lives where Jesus’ teaching is meant to apply. With the second question there could be possibility of filling in your whole time here. Get people talking, make sure they are thinking of such situations and then move them into the teaching itself.*

2. Consider and discuss the following quotes.

"Have you never tasted the luxury of indulging in hard thoughts against those who have, as you think, injured you? Have you never known what a positive fascination it is to brood over their unkindnesses, and to pry into their malice, and to imagine all sorts of wrong and uncomfortable things about them? It has made you wretched, of course, but it has been a fascinating sort of wretchedness that you could not easily give up." - Hannah Whitehall Smith

The problem with revenge is that it never gets what it wants. It never evens the score. Fairness never comes. The chain reaction set off by every act of vengeance always takes this unhindered course, it ties both the injured and injurer to an escalator of pain. – Lewis Smedes

*These are quotes that invite us after we have considered that revenge, retaliation and retribution are the natural human tendency to realize that they don't bring about what we are after and end up making us miserable. Once there is alignment on that reality again press into the passage itself, the role of the opening questions has had its effect.*

### **Read Matthew 5:38-42**

3. (vs. 38 and Leviticus 24:18-20) This law is called Lex Talionis – a law of equal retaliation. How would the law curb revenge and retaliation in a society?

*With revenge there is always the thinking that we have to exact our pound of flesh. This law would put limits on it. Only take what has been taken from you.*

*This law was found in sections of scripture that have been given over to case law. This means that within a culture shaped by scripture retribution was to be taken out of the hands of the individual and given into the hands of those tasked to administer justice. This allowed for the possibility of justice being fair and equal and break the cycles of violence and retribution.*

4. The Pharisees interpreted this law as meaning that you could insist upon your right to avenge yourself. Jesus' principle is that we would not resist the one who is evil. What doesn't this mean from other places in scripture? (eg. John 18:19-24; Acts 16:35-39; Romans 13:1-6)

*This doesn't mean not acknowledging what the person has done is evil. Jesus says in light of what they have done they are just that – evil – name it, own it.*

*This also doesn't mean that we give up our desire for justice. Both Jesus and Paul in the face of the unjust treatment they faced appealed to the law against their accusers. The one who says "do not resist the evil one" is the same one who demands justice be done. He just doesn't take it into his own hands.*

*The Romans 13 text speaks to the reality that God has given us structures of authority that are tasked with administering justice in a society. They are there to punish evil doers. Of course, injustice can exist in these systems as well and must be called to account, but we are being told here that there is a necessity for a justice system and law enforcement. This text can create a little bit of controversy in that it seems to suggest that God works through such human authority which has been used to establish human authority as enacting God's will regardless of what they do. This text cannot be used to affirm such a perspective as that stretches it beyond its purpose. If human authority and God's authority collide God's authority must reign. We are to stand against human authority in such instances.*

5. In each of these examples Jesus is inviting an active response that turns the tables on wrong. In what ways would these encounters change the whole dynamic of interaction? To what effect?

*I include here the section of the sermon where I reflect on the cultural context of each of these examples. The follow up questions are personal reflection based on that context.*

*Example 1 - if someone slaps you on the right cheek – now if you are right handed – the only way to strike someone on the right cheek is with the back of your hand – this was not a strike to cause physical harm – this was a strike in an eastern culture that communicated disrespect – dishonour – it was something done to insult – humiliate – degrade – it was something a superior would do to an inferior – masters backhanded slaves – occupiers backhanded the occupied - the whole intent of the blow was to put the person back into their proper place – at least as the superior saw it.*

*If someone strikes you on the right cheek – actively turn to them the other – that would invite a strike with a closed fist – but in this culture only people of equal status could fight with closed fists – Jesus is inviting an active response that changed the whole dynamic of the interaction – for it communicated – you're treating me as less than – seeking to put me in my proper place as you see it – but I am your equal – like you made in the image of God – an active response that turned the tables on wrong.*

*Example 2 – if someone sues you for your tunic – now this was a time where Israel was under Roman occupation – Rome funding its oppressive expansion through severe taxation – the wealthy responded by hiding their wealth in things that couldn't be taxed – land - possessions – but land was ancestral – handed down through the generations – how to pry people's fingers from it – when someone hit hard times lend them money at exorbitant interest – when they couldn't pay – sue them for their land and possessions – and hide your money from the tax man.*

*When someone sues you for your tunic – paints a picture of a wealthy creditor – taking a poor lender to court for failure to pay their debt – people only had two items of clothing – a tunic that was worn close to the skin – and a cloak that would double as a blanket at night – the law prohibited the seizure of a cloak as a matter of justice and human rights – so to take someone's cloak would bring them into direct confrontation with Yahweh - if someone sues you for your tunic – actively give them your cloak as well – which means what? – you are walking out of court as naked as the day you were born – and in a culture of honour and shame – where nakedness is shame – for those who see it - caused it – such an action would draw attention to the injustice of what was happening – exposing both the wealthy creditor and the justice system that was supporting such extortion – Jesus is inviting an active response that turns the tables on evil.*

*Example three - if someone forces you to go one mile – now the word force carried military connotations – you see at the time Roman law dictated that any soldier could force a civilian to carry their gear a mile – written right into the military code – but you couldn't ask them to carry it any further – and the Roman's were merciless against infractions – any soldier who had a civilian walk more than a mile - could be flogged – demoted - docked rations.*

*Can you picture it? A soldier has conscripted a civilian to carry their gear a mile - they get to the mile marker - and the soldier turns expecting to receive their gear back - the civilian keeps walking – what? – no civilian has ever done this before – usually they make themselves scarce when they see me coming – is it kindness? – but wait what if my commanding officer sees – can you imagine the soldier arguing with the civilian – pleading - can I have my stuff back – Jesus is inviting an active response that turns the tables on evil.*

6. Read Romans 12: 19-21. The ancient Egyptians had a practice of heaping coals on their head to show their remorse and repentance. In what ways can returning a person's evil for good lead them to repentance?

*I think Paul is saying that if you want the person who has wronged you to admit their wrong, and leave open the possibility of change, let go of vengeance and instead respond in love. This will turn the tables on the encounter, and when they see their wrong returned with good their defenses can be broken and their hearts made vulnerable. Your response may expose their wrong for what it is. Respond to their wrong with your wrong and often they will just externalize their wrong as due to your behavior.*

7. Refer once again to Romans 12:19-21. (vs. 19) In what way can having a trust in God's justice, God's commitment to right wrongs, help us turn away from revenge and return evil for good?

*One of the pieces that sits under our vengeance is that we want justice to be done. We do not often see justice done in this life, and as a result it becomes difficult to respond to such wrong with good, with forgiveness, with love. However, if our trust that God is coming again to make all things right, to bring about justice ultimately we can let go of our own desire for justice knowing that God will bring justice in a way that takes all things into consideration, even those things we can't see, can't know.*

8. In what ways can the gospel – seeing that God returns our evil for good – the good of dying in our place in Jesus taking the punishment for our sin – shape our hearts to return another's evil for good?

*The story I closed the sermon with may help to reflect on this question so I reshare it here:*

*In 2006 in Lancaster PA – a gunman forced his way into an Amish one-room school-house and opened fire – he shot 10 girls – wounding 5 and killing 5 before he turned the gun on himself.*

*That same day members of the Amish community went to the shooter's parent's home - we forgive your son – they said - and we grieve your loss – we want to do everything we can to support you in the days ahead – at the shooter's funeral there were more Amish than anyone else – the community later took up a collection to support the shooter's widow and his three children.*

*How could they possibly have returned such good in the face of such evil – How? Years later four secular sociologists sought to answer that lingering question – they wrote their findings in a book called Amish grace – and here was their analysis - The Amish believe Jesus Christ died on the cross forgiving his murderers, and as a result, to be a Christian is to have that at the very center of your life - because of that – they said – they responded the way they did.*

*To be a Christian – is to have Jesus and what he has done for us at the very center of our lives – a God who responds to evil with good – a God who responds to our rejection with love – a God who lays down his life for his enemies – may the Spirit root us in that truth – immerse us in that love – that we would be a people who do not return evil for evil – but overcome evil with good – for that is the way of the kingdom – that is the pattern of a new humanity.*